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COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Sub-Commission on Prevention of
Discrimination and Protection
of Minorities
Working Group on Indigenous Populations
Sixteenth session
27-31 July 1998
Item 5 of the provisional agenda

PRINCIPAL THEME: INDIGENOUS PEOPLES - EDUCATION AND LANGUAGE

Note by the secretariat

1. At its fifteenth session, the Working Group on Indigenous Populations decided to highlight the issue of "indigenous peoples: education and language" at its sixteenth session. In this regard it decided to encourage the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization to make its contribution both substantively and through the participation of the relevant experts and staff. The Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, in its resolution 1997/14, endorsed the decision of the Working Group. In its resolution 1998/13, the Commission on Human Rights also welcomed the decision of the Working Group to highlight the issue of "indigenous peoples: education and language".

2. In a letter dated 15 April 1998, the Chairperson-Rapporteur of the Working Group, Mrs. Erica-Irene Daes, wrote to the Director-General of UNESCO informing him of the theme of the sixteenth session of the Working Group and inviting his organization to make an appropriate contribution to the discussions. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, in a note dated 18 May 1998, transmitted a summary of the decisions of the Commission on Human Rights relating to indigenous issues to Governments, intergovernmental organizations and organizations of indigenous peoples, including the information that "indigenous peoples: education and language" would be highlighted by the Working Group at its session in July 1998.

3. The purpose of the present note is to identify possible themes related to the topic under discussion and to encourage a technical and forward-looking exchange of views and information which would help the international community to take practical steps to assist States and indigenous peoples achieve improvements in educational opportunity and access and contribute to the protection of indigenous languages. Previous experience of the Working Group suggests that a debate focused on a specific issue related to the rights of indigenous peoples helps participants to understand the broader dimensions of a question and learn from developments in countries other than their own. In particular, it is to be hoped that indigenous and non-indigenous teachers and educational practitioners working with indigenous peoples, including administrators of educational programmes, researchers and other experts, can find stimulation and encouragement from sharing information about their different practical experiences.

Improving educational opportunity

4. One critical issue which confronts some indigenous peoples is their limited access to mainstream education at all levels - primary and secondary schooling, university and tertiary education as well as vocational training. In general, statistics relating to indigenous education indicate a proportionately lower level of access, attendance and achievement than the wider society. The greater difficulties experienced by indigenous people in obtaining formal academic qualifications, and the more restricted opportunities for education generally, impact upon employment and income as well as on the broader participation of indigenous persons in civil society. Education is recognized as a means of breaking the cycle of poverty, disadvantage and exploitation in which some indigenous communities find themselves entrapped.

5. Indigenous peoples, Governments and independent researchers have identified some of the underlying causes of educational disadvantage of indigenous peoples and looked at ways of addressing them. In the last two decades or more national educational policies and indigenous initiatives in some countries have contributed towards dramatic improvements in indigenous education through scholarships, special schools for indigenous children, the development of more culturally appropriate educational methods, and programmes for distance learning.

6. Under this question, the following possible themes are proposed:

(a) Causes of educational disadvantage;

(b) Special measures of States to improve access of indigenous children to education;

(c) Culturally appropriate education for indigenous peoples;

(d) Experiences of distance learning for indigenous peoples in remote areas;

(e) Continuous and adult learning for indigenous peoples.

Strengthening indigenous educational establishments and languages

7. Indigenous peoples have criticized and condemned past practices of States by which indigenous children were separated from their parents and sent to residential schools. Criticisms have also been levelled against religious schools established in more isolated indigenous communities whose intent was to undermine indigenous cultures, customs and beliefs. There is now widespread recognition that such practices constituted a discriminatory policy aimed at diminishing and destroying indigenous cultures and societies. Indigenous peoples have also expressed their concern about school curricula and classroom practices which undermine indigenous value systems and self-esteem.

8. In their efforts to protect their culture, reinvigorate their languages and ensure the transmission of values from the older generation to the younger, indigenous peoples have established their own schools, colleges, and language-teaching courses. Such educational initiatives provide opportunities for indigenous people to have courses in their own languages and in an atmosphere which takes account of their own customs. States have introduced changes in their educational policies to encourage and provide support for indigenous-run schools. In many countries, these developments have led to a rise in educational performance and a resurgence in the use and interest in indigenous languages. Furthermore, there are now a growing number of university departments focusing on indigenous issues and indigenous-controlled research and adult learning institutes.

9. Under this question, the following possible themes are proposed:

(a) Experiences of bilingual teaching;

(b) Indigenous-run schools and colleges;

(c) Experiences of reviving and strengthening indigenous languages;

(d) Special measures taken by States to support indigenous involvement in and control of their own educational establishments and curricula.

Reflecting indigenous heritage in national curricula

10. It is recognized that the histories and cultures of indigenous peoples have often been portrayed in an inaccurate or derogatory way in public documents and some educational materials. The effect of such literature led to misunderstandings about indigenous cultures and misinterpretations of history, thereby contributing to prejudice in the wider society. Efforts are now being made to ensure that educational material reflects in a balanced way the pluricultural character of most modern States and their histories. The draft United Nations declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples presently under review by a working group of the Commission on Human Rights contains in article 16 a specific provision to this effect.

11. In this respect, the cultures and histories of indigenous peoples are today more accurately reflected in educational materials and public information. Indigenous and non-indigenous experts are involved in the

development of relevant documentation and teacher training in countries where indigenous peoples live increasingly includes in some part of the programme the diversity of cultures, in particular indigenous cultures, that the teacher will meet in the classroom. Indigenous peoples have called for a greater involvement in setting the framework for research and university-level education since until comparatively recently there was little opportunity for indigenous students to follow courses of study on their own sciences, knowledge systems and cultures. Furthermore, non-indigenous students were not offered any possibility to follow courses on contemporary indigenous issues. A workshop for research and higher education institutions focusing on indigenous issues is due to be organized by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, as requested by the General Assembly in its resolution 52/108, in late 1998/early 1999.

12. Under this question the following possible themes are proposed:

(a) Teaching materials reflecting indigenous cultures and perspectives;

(b) Sensitizing teacher training to indigenous peoples;

(c) Special measures taken by States to develop curricula and education reflecting indigenous cultures;

(d) Elements for the discussion at the workshop for research and higher education institutes focusing on indigenous issues as proposed by the General Assembly in its resolution 52/108.